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Perfect Blue: An Exploration of Female Exploitation In Media and The Male Gaze

Satoshi Kon is widely considered to be one of the best directors and creative minds in the world of not only anime but film and media in general; often being asked if he would ever enter the world of live action but has said he is more comfortable and has more fun in the avenue of limitless animation. Kon's writing is known for often depicting dark themes that are ingrained in everyday happenings and emotion but tackles them in a supernatural, mind bending, and genre bending way as a means to explore them through a different lens, often disorienting even the viewer with what is really happening and what is simply an illusion. Along with his use of endings that are not clear cut in how you should feel about them; his films almost always end in an open ended manner, not giving the viewer a distinct way that they are supposed to perceive it, simply making them sit with what they had just watched or read. The few times when the things he makes do have a "happy" or fully complete ending are ones that often feel as though they are earned and not in an attempt to wrap up the characters story or make the viewer feel better about the film, which feels like an uncommon practice in the world of animated media. These choices feel meticulously handled, along with his use of predominantly female leads. Often telling stories that the male point view would simply struggle to relate to. Kon's constant use of female characters can be traced back to his high school days. He was the odd one out growing up, in the fact that he predominantly hung out with the girls at his high school and had admiration for them, their emotional intelligence, and overall complexity in comparison to the boys. This idea of admiration bleeds its way in his work with all of his lead characters. Kon even stated when asked about his use of female characters that "With a male character I can see only the bad aspects. Because I am a man I know very well what a male character is thinking ... on the other hand, if

you write a female protagonist, because it's the opposite sex and I don't know them the way I know a male, I can project my obsession onto the characters and expand the aspects I want to describe. "(Brown 24). He often does this to exercise and challenge his current view through a lens of which he does not fully understand without outwardly making them a caricature of who he thinks they should be. His characters are grounded, realistic, and not just an attempt to project the male gaze, with *Perfect Blue* being no different.

Perfect Blue is the 1997 full length debut of director Satoshi Kon, with producer Hiroaki Inoue. It is beloved for its timeless theme and center plot point along with its deconstruction of femininity, the way women are portrayed in media, the ways they attain notoriety in the entertainment industry, and how that is impacted and is affected by the male gaze. The film went on to gather critical acclaim as well as being nominated for and winning many awards such as the Fantasia Festival in Montréal, along with the Fantasporto Film Festival in Portugal. The film *Perfect Blue* is loosely based off of a light novel called 'Complete Metamorphosis' by Yoshikazu Takeuchi. While the book depicts a straightforward stalker horror story, Kon made the decision to take the film in a more psychological horror and surreal direction to fit his own personal taste and agenda; allowing for a deeper and more internal look at not only the titular main character but also an internal look at the male gaze, with one of the main ideas aimed to be tackled being the thin practically blurred line between fantasy and reality in the eyes of the performer and the consumer. Which can easily be dialed up to an extremity when said performer is a woman.

The film follows Mima Kirigoe (voiced by Junko Iawo), a pop idol in Tokyo who retires in order to pursue acting, however after doing so she starts to get inexplicable letters from an

unknown source, discovers a website called “Mima’s Room” filled with personal information about her; information in which only she would know and people around her turn up killed. These events are happening while she has also taken up a minor role in an ongoing detective drama TV series that forces her to take up unflattering and sadistic scenes, changing her perception in the public eye as well as her view of herself. The film showcases Mima’s loss of her real self in the attempt to please others as well as make avenues for herself to achieve success and events only escalate as the run time extends.

The term ‘Male Gaze’ was coined in 1975 by British feminist film theorist, Laura Mulvey. The Male Gaze theory was developed in an attempt to deconstruct the sexual objectification of women in media and has gone on to help identify issues with gender in film. Oftentimes metaphors of the male gaze and the deconstruction of women in media are easily overlooked without intent of dissection or handfisted in its messages to the point of no nuance. Perfect Blue stands out in this matter with its clear metaphors being presented with room for interpretation. While the idol industry seems to avoid the typical more sexualized stereotypes presented by the western generated male gaze by its pop stars, the Japanese market does not seem to be any better. Often with the main portrayal of women being innocent as a replacement, the main idea being hammered in is virginity and no sexual promiscuity. The idea of being in control of a woman and maintaining her purity is an idea played with in Perfect Blue. An example being in the opening scene of the film, it is Mima’s last performance as an idol and the camera cuts away to the point of view of a man in the crowd holding his hand out in a way where it creates the illusion that Mima is being held in his palm. In the book ‘Women: images & Realities, A multicultural Anthology’ in a chapter titled the ‘Cult of Virginity’ author Jessica

Valenti discusses the fake role virginity plays in our society when pertaining to women and their morals, stating “But what virginity is, what it was, and how it's being used now to punish women and roll back their rights is at the core of the purity myth. Because today, in a world where porn culture and re energized abstinence movements collide, the moral panic myth about young women's supposed promiscuity is diverting attention from the real problem-that women are still being judged (sometimes to death) on something that doesn't really exist: virginity (Valenti 141). “ with her going on to say “Idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters-not what we accomplish, not what we think, not what we care about and work for (Valenti 142).”

The effects of virginity and purity in replacement of morals along with the negative effects that can occur because of that are demonstrated in full effect in the film. Mima’s fans as well as the media are displeased with her decisions to take up more promiscuous roles. This distaste results in the main stalker character, Mamoru Uchida or ‘Me-Mania’ (voiced by Masaaki Okura) to be led to believe that she is an imposter and takes his own measures to assault and kill the “fake Mima”, believing she is not deserving of dignity or respect. Mamoru in particular is meant to represent the stereotypical “Otaku” character who is effectively lonely and disconnected with reality but also plays into the effects these portrayals and views of women’s purity have on the general populace of men. This view on women’s purity however is not just a domino effect with men then projected onto women. This image of purity and perfection is most prominent in the minds of women themselves. This idea is further expanded upon in the same ‘Women: Images & Realities’ book in a chapter instead titled ‘Gender in Media’. Discussing young women’s active effort to unlearn being displeased with their bodies and image in

comparison to what they see portrayed in movies and music videos. Which begs the question of how this idea of perfection can not only affect its consumers but also the performers themselves. In the case of *Mima*, the film presents this in a way where Mima is forced to engage with the idolized version of herself. This idolized version of herself attempts to convince her she should go back to being an idol and should not further engage with acting due to her not being cut out for it. Everyone including her manager Rumi Hidaka (voiced by Rice Matsumoto), who was the main catalyst behind Mima's idol image voices her dissatisfaction with her current acting endeavors and pushes her to go back to being an idol. While her Agent Tadokoro (voiced by Shinpachi Tsuji) is the one who pushes her to be an actress and change up her image. Both of these along with some clear doubt in herself to begin with are shown to have detrimental effects on Mima's psychology and self image. She is often shown in a battle with herself to return to being an idol, which is reinforced in reality by the pressure to remain pure and how shameful and exploitative the roles she's currently taking up actually are. This directly mirrors experience to women in the model industry in real life. The film *Killing Us Softly 4* (2010) by director Sut Jhalley and speaker Jean Kilbourne, highlights a particular case when model Cindy Crawford was edited in post to be slimmer and have a bigger bust in her own ad and famously said "I wish I looked like Cindy Crawford". Photographers and editors also famously edit the models and bodies of women in advertisements and posters, often splicing the best perceived aspect of individual model bodies to make them perfect as also presented in a clip in the film. This type of editing and constant strive for "utmost perfection" can prove detrimental to the models as well as the general populace.

Perfect Blue's progressive and on point narratives can also sometimes dive into some possibly harmful and inaccurate stereotypes, whether intentional or unintentional. One of the scenes that even Kon himself is not proud of is the faux gang rape scene being so graphic with later in the film Mima's eventual attack from her stalker, mirroring the exact scene in from the TV series. In the case of Mima, she is attempting to land a larger background role in a drama series and is brought up to do this sadistic scene. Although this can be seen as a harsh reality in that women are put in, in not only real life but also in the grand scheme of the entertainment industry as a means to get their foot in the door. Some could argue this scene can feel drawn out and excessively detailed to a point that could be deemed unnecessary for the grand scheme of the film. Rumi even voices her own distaste for this idea, but is backed by Agent Tadokoro and Mima herself, it all being simply a means to an end for them.

Rumi's responsibility and placement in this film, at first viewing, seemingly is meant to mirror the voice of the audience. Often voicing her discrepancies with Mima's choice to take up sadistic scenes and Risque photo shoots. However, through further examination the audience will soon realize that Rumi is further enforcing ideas of misogyny and patriarchy. Her perceived job is to try to maintain Mima's innocent image throughout her acting career, with that image directly conflicting the roles she has taken up. Although, her role could further reinforce that idea that women being raped or being more open sexually makes them less of a valuable woman. This contradiction causes for a deeper inner look at the audience and their so-called "feminist" beliefs if they sided with Rumi. She seems to exhibit traits of horizontal hostility or internalized oppression with the image of how women should be portrayed. Internalized oppression being when members of marginalized groups police each other's behavior or appearance based on the

values of the dominant group. Upon further context it is hinted that Rumie herself was a former failed idol causing her to live vicariously through Mima. She seems to not be portrayed as attractive, with her eyes being significantly far apart and her proportions being bigger. This image of her could also be seen as a regressive approach that bigger women who are deemed as less attractive always want to emulate the slimmer more attractive ones.

On another note of possible stereotypes being perpetuated is Perfect Blue and its use of male characters. The male characters are often portrayed as negative or somewhat predatory. Within the film there do not seem to be any truly fleshed out or all that positive male characters throughout its runtime. Even its stand outs like Agent Tadokoro or even one of the men who apologized to her before filming the faux rape scene, none of these men seemed fleshed out enough to form a real lasting impact. This could very well play into the prominent female lead as a means to not pull any punches in order to demonstrate the ugliness of women's portrayals and interactions with men in designated spaces.

Despite the discrepancies that can be made, Perfect Blue still and will always remain a special movie when compared to any piece of media. This film cemented Satoshi Kon as a beloved director and creative in the hearts of many. For being released in 1997, its messaging and subtleties still ring true 26 years later, possibly now more than ever. Living within an era where the lines of technology and privacy are becoming more blurry and young people are now more aware of how their groups are portrayed in the media. It provides a thorough and entertaining watch to those who want a well written thriller, love breathtaking animation, anime in general, film as a whole, and self-proclaimed feminists alike. Nobody feels excluded in

Perfect Blue, which is why it remains such a cultural and artistically relevant film now and for decades to come.

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